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## THE NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS' INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Old Testament phraseology is frequently reproduced in the New Testament. A glance at Westcott and Hort's, or Nestle's, Greek New Testament, where these borrowed words are printed in special type, shows one the wide extent of this influence. According to one count there are 78 formal quotations in Paul's writings, 46 in the Synoptic Gospels, 28 in Hebrews, 23 in Acts, 12 in the Gospel of John, and about a dozen in the remaining books.<sup>1</sup> The less formal use of Scripture is also extensive. The Book of Revelation, for example, though it gives no explicit citations, is saturated with Old Testament phraseology. Throughout the New Testament there is a similar coloring, affecting not only the language but also the thought of the new faith. Reflection upon Scripture seems to have been an integral factor in primitive Christian thinking.

The New Testament writers' attitude toward the Old Testament was essentially the same as that of their Jewish contemporaries.<sup>2</sup> These books were believed to contain an explicit revelation of the divine will not only for Israel but also for Christians. God who had thus spoken in times past through the mouth of his servants still spoke by the written records, if only the writings were properly interpreted. Naturally Christians held that they alone, through their faith in Christ, had come into possession of the key to all true scriptural exposition; so they turned with full confidence to the ancient records as the final court of appeal in religious matters.

It is true that Christianity, at least in its earliest period, was not so emphatically a book-religion as was contemporary Judaism.

<sup>1</sup> Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 391 f.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. "The Scribes' Interpretation of the Old Testament," *Biblical World*, July, 1911.

The ecstatic experiences of the Christians gave them a sense of authoritative insight and spiritual elevation not shared by the ordinary interpreter. The result, however, was not any rejection of the Old Testament's authority, but a bold and free exposition of its teaching to make it support the special tenets of the new faith. Even in the case of Paul, whose controversy with the legalists might conceivably have resulted for him in a depreciation of the Old Testament, confidence in the divine origin and authority of the Scriptures remains unshaken. "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). "Whatsoever things were written beforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4). It is not for the ox that God cared when he spoke in Deuteronomy about not muzzling the ox which treads out the grain, rather "saith he it assuredly for our sake" (I Cor. 9:9 f.).

Thus Christians took over the Old Testament without robbing it of the prestige it held in Judaism. This was a natural procedure, since the original setting of Christianity was thoroughly Jewish. The ultimate outcome also was that Christianity became pronouncedly the religion of a book. Even in the New Testament period it has become essentially such. Paul's repeated assertion that these things were written "for our sake" (Rom. 4:23 f.; 15:4; I Cor. 9:9 f.; 10:6, 11), the way in which the evangelists find Jesus' career foreshadowed in the prophets, the fulfilments of Scripture which are seen in the history of the early church as given in the Book of Acts, in fact the attitude of the New Testament writers in general, attest the early existence of the notion that the Old Testament was even for Christians a most valuable expression of the divine will. These were sacred books, inspired of God, profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction, and able to make men "wise unto salvation" (II Tim. 3:15 f.). By prophecy in particular were men enlightened as by a "lamp shining in a dark place," so believers turned with all confidence to the past since they held that "no prophecy ever came by the will of man, but men spake from God being moved by the Holy Spirit" (II Peter 1:19 ff.).

There is scarcely a book of the present Old Testament with which the New Testament writers do not show an acquaintance, either in direct quotations or in passing allusions and incidental similarities in words and thought.<sup>3</sup> Occasional use is also made of books that did not attain canonical standing, as well as of legends circulating in popular tradition. The Book of Enoch is explicitly cited in Jude, vs. 14, and the same work seems to be the source of information for the statement in Jude, vs. 6, about the angels "kept in everlasting bonds under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." Reference to Michael and the devil disputing about the body of Moses (Jude, vs. 9) probably is derived from the Assumption of Moses. The mention in Heb. 11:37 of ancient worthies "sawn asunder" seems to be derived from a Jewish midrash about the martyrdom of Isaiah. In fact Jewish legends, supplementing Old Testament narratives, were taken over in several instances by New Testament writers. Paul adopts the tradition about the rock following the wandering Israelites in the wilderness (I Cor. 10:4). The idea of the angels' mediation in the giving of the law appears in Gal. 3:19; Acts. 7:53; Heb. 2:2. The biblical "three years" for the duration of the famine in Elijah's day becomes "three years and six months" in Luke 4:25 and James 5:17. Salmon who is mentioned in the Old Testament merely as the father of Boaz, is said in Matt. 1:5 to have had Rahab as his wife. Further information about Moses' acquaintance with Egyptian learning is found in Acts 7:22, and the names of two Egyptian sorcerers who withstood Moses are given in II Tim. 3:8.

In thus drawing upon Jewish midrashim to supplement Scripture, the New Testament writers show how closely they followed in the footsteps of their Jewish predecessors. Indeed the general interests of the early Christian interpreter and the results of his work are more Jewish in type than one might at first imagine. To be sure, Christians had an entirely new interest at heart—they were not concerned primarily to enforce the law of Moses and the traditions of the teachers. But their method of emphasizing the supreme significance of Jesus and his work was not so very different

<sup>3</sup> According to Toy, *Quotations in the New Testament*, vi, n. 1, Obad., Ezra, Neh., and Esther are the only books to which the New Testament contains no allusions.

from the method of the Jews in setting forth the exemplary and inspiring qualities of Israel's ancient worthies. The literary form of the New Testament narrative has many points of likeness to the haggadic midrashim. Harking back to the ancients as examples for later generations and emphasis upon the fulfilment of prophecy are characteristic both of Judaism and Christianity. The preservation and elaboration of Jesus' discourses for the instruction of believers went on side by side with a similar custom in Judaism of referring to great teachers in Israel. The repetition of proverbial sayings, the explanation of hidden meanings, and the use of parables are familiar features in the Jewish as well as in the Christian thought. The work of the New Testament interpreter corresponds in a striking way with the description in Ecclus. 39:1 ff. of the duties of the ideal scribe: "He will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, and will be occupied in prophecies. He will keep the discourse of the men of renown, and will enter in amidst the subtleties of parables. He will seek out the hidden meaning of proverbs, and be conversant in the dark sayings of parables."

The exact content of the New Testament writers' "Bible" is not known to us. They were familiar with the threefold division of the Jewish canon—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Psalms); but it is not likely that they concerned themselves with critical questions regarding the exact limits of canonicity. It was more in agreement with their free and spontaneous spirit to appropriate whatever suited their purpose. This free play of personal preference is evident even from a comparison between different Christian writers. The evangelists show a strong bias in favor of the Prophets and the Psalms. On the other hand, Paul and the author of Hebrews cite mainly from the Pentateuch; while the uncanonical Book of Enoch has largely influenced Jude and perhaps to some extent Revelation. Again, the first part of the Epistle of James draws its Old Testament language mostly from the Pentateuch, but in the second part the Prophets and the Psalms are more frequently used. Then there is also a wide range in the choice of quotations and allusions even when two authors are selecting their material from the same general field. For example the first and the fourth evangelists are each especially interested

to make it clear that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, yet in the type of prophecy which each selects and in the manner of detecting the fulfilment these writers differ considerably. Thus it appears that each New Testament writer quoted from such books and such portions of the Old Testament as suited his particular purpose.

Nor did the Christians trouble themselves with critical textual problems. The great majority of citations are evidently taken from the Septuagint. This is true even where the writer, as in Paul's case, may have been able to read the original Hebrew, and where he probably would have found some variations between the Hebrew and the Greek texts. Aramaic seems to have been the language of the early Christian community in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1), so that in some parts of the gospel tradition Old Testament quotations may have passed through Aramaic into Greek; but our present gospels are genuinely Greek compositions written by men whose Bible was the Septuagint. Thus this version not only most naturally supplied the Old Testament renderings, but it also became in some instances a kind of literary model for Christian compositions (e.g., Luke 1:5 ff.). In general, then, it was the Greek Old Testament which the New Testament writers interpreted. But we cannot imagine that they took pains, as moderns do, to obtain a critically accurate text, and it is even probable that often they freely quoted or paraphrased from memory.<sup>4</sup>

The special interests which the authors of the New Testament seek to make Scripture serve are not only instructive, but also determine to some extent the interpretative methods employed. Its ordinary use both in private life and public worship to stimulate personal piety was naturally inherited from Judaism by Christianity. The distinctive thing in Christian usage was the scriptural argument of the new apologetic. The early believers, being themselves Jews, instinctively turned to the Old Testament for the constructive materials of their new theology. Moreover they must draw their arguments from this source if they hoped to combat successfully their Jewish opponents. If the new faith

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Mark 1:2 f., where a combination of Mal. 3:1 and Isa. 40:3 is cited as from "Isaiah the prophet." Matt. 27:9 cites Zech. 11:13 as from "Jeremiah."

was not "scriptural" it could not be true, but if it could be shown to be "scriptural" then it must be true. This was the stress point for primitive Christian thought.

Accordingly we find Paul sometimes deducing a labored argument from Scripture in support of special phases of his belief, while at other times he drives home a point by a forceful Old Testament phrase. Emphasis upon the atoning worth of Jesus' death and belief in his resurrection on the third day are fortified by reference to "the Scriptures." The doctrine of justification by faith is given an elaborate scriptural support in the letters to the Galatians and to the Romans. In a similar fashion the gentile mission is defended, and various phases of Christian thought and activity are stimulated through the use of Old Testament words. Christ's supremacy and the ultimate triumph of the Christian faith are also scripturally assured. In much the same manner the writer of Hebrews not only elaborates and defends the main items in his theology, but also encourages his readers to patient endurance amid the trying experiences of life. Paul and the author of Hebrews do not stand alone in this free use of the Old Testament to enlarge upon both the doctrinal and the practical phases of Christianity. Indeed the custom was probably quite general, as Christian leaders found it necessary to indoctrinate and encourage their fellow-believers.

In the gospel narratives, Old Testament language is found to serve several special purposes. At the time of Jesus' baptism, and again on the occasion of his transfiguration, God speaks in the language of scripture. It also furnishes material for the colloquy between Jesus and Satan in the temptation incident. Furthermore, many of Jesus' most solemn and forceful pronouncements are reproductions of Old Testament phrases, which perhaps accounts for the occasional difficulty in understanding these utterances. The ring of holy writ may sometimes have been prized above perspicuity. Jesus declares in the words of Isaiah that he has been endowed with the spirit to preach the gospel to the poor. The beatitudes are expressed in the thought and phrasing of Old Testament passages. Jesus, in pronouncing against divorce, cites Gen. 1:27, and affirms his belief in the resurrection by repeating

a verse from the "book of Moses." The question of the Messiah's Davidic sonship is propounded in the language of Ps. 110, and just what Jesus meant is still a problem. Zech. 13:7 is made the basis of a prediction that Jesus' followers will be "offended" by his death, and his final exclamation on the cross is the repetition of a picturesque expression from Ps. 22:1.

Thus Old Testament phraseology served to enrich the incidental and descriptive details of gospel narrative. But in addition to this it proved an efficient instrument in the evangelists' own argument for the messianic significance of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark opens with two prophetic passages cited to show that John the Baptist's work was preparatory to the Messiah's advent. Matthew and Luke carry this argument from scripture back into their accounts of the birth and childhood of Jesus and of John. In the story of Jesus' life the first evangelist especially points out particulars in which certain prophecies have come to explicit fulfilment (1:23; 2:15, 18, 23; 4:15, 16; 8:17; 12:18-21; 13:35; 21:5; 27:9, 10). Though the other gospel writers are less definite in noting the points of correspondence between Jesus' career and Old Testament predictions, it is clear that they all assent to the principle. In Acts scriptural support is also given for belief in the messianic character of the primitive Christian community.

Indeed it may be questioned whether the New Testament writers did not go so far in their use of the Old Testament as to make it virtually one of their sources in writing the history of Jesus and the community. This has evidently been the case with the first evangelist in one instance. In describing the preparation for the entry into Jerusalem, Mark 11:2 records that Jesus sent his disciples after a certain colt on which he wished to ride. In Matt. 21:2 the narrative of Mark has been combined with a free citation from Zech. 9:9: "Tell ye the daughter of Zion, behold thy king cometh unto thee meek and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." The first evangelist, overlooking the Hebrew parallelism, thought two animals were intended—the ass and the colt—and the Markan narrative was therefore changed to make it conform to this interpretation of the passage from Zech. To what extent this principle of adjusting Christian tradition to suit



Old Testament passages affected the final form of gospel tradition cannot now be determined, but that it exerted some influence is beyond question.

Nor is it impossible that some items in the tradition may have been very largely colored by, if indeed they did not originate in, an Old Testament source. It seems strange, for instance, that Jesus, who by word and deed so clearly showed his interest in the welfare of all needy men, should announce that his parables were intended to hide his message from his hearers (Mark 4:12; cf. Isa. 6:9 f.); or that he who so emphasized love should declare his mission to be "to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law; and a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matt. 10:35 ff.; cf. Micah 7:6). But a Christian who read the corresponding Old Testament passages in the light of experiences in the apostolic age might readily infer that they were genuine foreshadowings of the history. Hence it was only natural that Jesus should be credited with this same keenness of vision to detect the import of significant Old Testament prophecies. Perhaps a more striking instance of the use of the Old Testament as a "source" is to be seen in the account of Jesus' infancy as given by Matthew. Here the thought of each paragraph revolves about an Old Testament citation as its center (1:23; 2:6, 15, 18).

The methods of interpretation illustrated in the New Testament vary somewhat with different writers, but in the main they are the same as those employed by the scribes. With the Christians interpretation was less "professional," yet its methods show the same free handling of the text, the same disregard for the original historical setting and meaning, the same looseness in logic, and to a slight extent the same tendency to become artificial which characterized Jewish interpretation. A few illustrations will make this point clear.

The passage from Isa. 40:3, applied by the synoptists to John the Baptist (Mark 1:3; Matt. 3:3; Luke 3:4), reads in the Septuagint: "A voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God." As the context in Isaiah shows, this is a description of a preparation for

Israel's return to Palestine from the captivity in Babylonia. God is represented as leading his people back to the Holy Land, all obstacles having been removed. But the absence of any messianic reference in the original passage does not trouble the evangelists. The words, apart from the context, lend themselves quite readily to this thought, so the original meaning is ignored in order that the passage may be used of John. This has necessitated a change of the clause "make straight the paths of our God" into "make straight his paths," since it is for Jesus' coming that John is preparing and Christians in the synoptists' day could call Jesus "Lord" but had not yet come to speak of him as "God." Similarly Mal. 3:1 (in the Septuagint), "I send my messenger and he shall prepare a way before me," becomes "I send my messenger before thee, who shall prepare thy way" (Mark 1:2; Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27). In the original God was speaking about his own coming "unto his temple." The gospel writers, in order to make use of the passage for their purpose, had to disregard the original context and change the person of the pronoun from first to second. The list of such examples might be greatly increased.

The inference drawn from a scriptural citation is sometimes very doubtful, judged from the standpoint of strict logic. To illustrate, the words addressed to Moses in Exod. 3:6, "I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," are made a proof of immortality according to Mark 12:26 f. The two premises of the argument are (1) God is the God of Abraham, etc., and (2) God is the God of the living only; hence the conclusion (3) Abraham shall live, that is, shall rise from the dead, and by implication others also shall rise. There are several difficulties here. The fundamental one, so far as the use of the Old Testament passage is concerned, is the assumption that the future rather than the historic career of Abraham is meant. As an argument for resurrection the citation has no logical value. In a similar way Paul's argument from "seed" and "seeds," or from the comparison between Hagar and Sarah (Gal. 3:16; 4:22 ff.) fails to carry conviction. It is analogical, not logical.

But for the New Testament writers and their readers, rigid logic was not a necessity. They were moved by suggestions, figures,

types, analogies, allegories. How frequently words from the Old Testament serve to strengthen some worthy Christian conviction and to suggest a noble thought or act! Paul comforted himself and confirmed his resolution with such words as "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven" (Rom. 4:7) and "For thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter" (Rom. 8:36). He administers in scriptural terms a

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forceful admonition to the Corinthians against moral laxity (II Cor. 6:17), and the examples of the ancients become warnings and encouragements for Christians (cf. I Cor. 10:1-13). The author of Hebrews was particularly skilful in finding suggestive analogies. He argued for the certainty of Christian hope on the analogy of God's provision for Israel in the past, the universal high-priesthood of Christ was found prefigured in Melchizedek, and the tabernacle in the wilderness was a "shadow" of the heavenly tabernacle in which Christ, the Christians' high priest, ministered continually for his people.

The suggestiveness of these methods of interpretation is always open to the danger of overemphasis. The real meaning of a passage may disappear and an imaginary hidden meaning take its place. The result in such cases is a barren and artificial exegesis, as is so clearly illustrated in certain phases of rabbinical interpretation. The New Testament writers have in the main avoided this unfortunate result. Occasionally they play with word-derivations (e.g., Matt. 1:21-23), or revel in symbolism seemingly for its own sake (e.g., in the Book of Revelation); but in general their use of Scripture is determined by the practical needs of the Christian life. It is not surprising that they should have adopted current methods in defending their theological views; the more significant thing is that their motive for interpretation was for the most part vitally religious. It was born of experience in the new faith—a fact which probably accounts for the selection of so many Old Testament citations bearing upon the more serious side of religious life in Israel.

We should never forget that the scribe and the Christian interpreter were men of their own age. Their work is not to be measured by a modern criterion, but rather by the degree of fidelity with which they met the needs of their own time. Measured by this standard they are not found wanting. On the other hand, today we find ourselves confronted by new demands, in the light of which the value of our interpretation must be tested. If we were surrounded by the conditions of the first century a repetition of ancient methods might suffice, but in an age when historical and grammatical study goes in advance of the interpreter, and when scientific thinking demands that fancy shall be treated as fancy and fact as fact, the use of new methods becomes imperative.